

***At the Queen's Hall with E. M. Forster and Jean Laplanche***

***Rosemary Rizq***

***For Rachel.***

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In Chapter 5 of E. M. Forster's (1910) novel *'Howards End'*, the two Schlegel sisters, along with a small circle of friends and family, are attending a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony at the Queen's Hall in London. Helen, the younger of the two sisters, has recently broken off a fleeting engagement to Paul Wilcox after realising that *'the whole Wilcox family was...just a wall of newspapers and motor cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell, I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness'* (p. 25). The elder sister Margaret is later to marry Paul's widowed father Henry. Financially successful but emotionally obtuse, his life as a bourgeois businessman is bleakly designated by Trilling (1943) as *'gainful, mediocre and unaware'* (p. 120). His first wife's ancestral home, Howards End, will come to symbolise the spiritual legacy to which Margaret is unwitting heir. It will be the lot of the cultured, progressive Schlegel sisters to help the Wilcox family connect their masculine-dominated world of economic interests, their outer life of *'telegrams and anger'* (p. 26) with the inner life of personal relations and art, literature and music. Between them, the sisters represent the driving moral force that *'should connect the prose in us with the passion'*, without which, as Forster writes, *'we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man'* (p. 194).

At the Queen's Hall, Forster introduces us to the various ways in which the characters in his story listen to Beethoven. Tibby, the Schlegels' brother, is *'profoundly versed in counterpoint'* (p. 31). He sits with the score on his knee in order to appreciate the music on an abstract, intellectual level. Aunt Juley, determined to enjoy her day out, wants to *'tap surreptitiously when the tunes come'* (p. 31). Fraulein Mosebach is there simply because Beethoven is German; and cousin Freda listens to Classical Music so reverently that she is unable to respond to Helen's smile. Leonard Bast, a struggling insurance clerk whom the Schlegels encounter by chance at the concert, is entirely distracted by the expense of the occasion and the subsequent comic muddle over lost umbrellas and handbags. These different responses to music and by extension to culture more generally, are the animating focus of the story. For culture, according to Forster, is not simply the appreciation of art, music and literature for its own sake. It is the means by which we can *'see life steadily and see it whole'* (p. 282), the vehicle through which different groups may come together, transcending the limitations of race, sex, class or nation. It is also the means through which individuals may come to connect with different parts of themselves, bringing the ordinary, everyday stuff of life into contact with the inner, transgressive stuff of unconscious desire.

Perhaps it is no co-incidence, then, that it is through Helen's consciousness that we first hear the music of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony, for it is Helen's transgressive sexual relationships that act as the principal catalyst for action within the story. After listening to the *'heroes and shipwrecks'* of the first movement, Helen is impatient to hear the third: *'...the music started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end. Others followed him. They were not aggressive creatures; it was that that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world. After the interlude of the elephants dancing, they returned and made the observation for the second time. Helen could not contradict them, for, once*

*at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right' (p. 33).*

The extraordinary description that Forster unfolds over a couple of pages allows us to see that Helen is no passive recipient of Beethoven's music. Unlike her companions, she is not simply listening to the notes, tapping her foot, reading the abstract score or planning to engage in clever, scholarly discussion afterwards. She is engaged, absorbed; and at the same time, she is creatively making meaning, using the music to develop a vision of her own as she listens: *'as if things were going too far, Beethoven took hold of the goblins and made them do what he wanted. He appeared in person. He gave them a little push, and they began to walk in a major key instead of a minor, and then – he blew with his mouth and they were scattered! [...] And the goblins – they had not really been there at all? There were only the phantoms of cowardice and unbelief? One healthy human impulse would dispel them? Men like the Wilcoxes or President Roosevelt would say yes. Beethoven knew better. The goblins really had been there. They might return - and they did'* (p. 33). For Helen, the message of the goblins is one that evokes the panic and emptiness she feels in the aftermath of her romantic interest in Paul. Indeed, it is his family's smug, privileged life of newspapers, motor cars and golf clubs that will unthinkingly bring devastation to the lives of others. As she rushes out of the concert hall, overwhelmed by her thoughts, feelings and associations, Forster tells us: *'The music had summed up to her all that had happened or could happen in her career. She read it as a tangible statement...The notes meant this and that to her, and they could have no other meaning and life could have no other meaning'* (p. 34).

Music of course overwhelmingly signifies. It is, as Forster suggests, a communication, a *'tangible statement'*. But what does this statement say, and to whom is it made? When we listen to music, we know that we are being addressed but, unlike Helen, we find the precise meaning of the address mysterious, unfathomable, untranslatable. Just as we are unable to ignore its call, so too it lies beyond our capacity to fully grasp it. We are once again in a situation that the late Jean Laplanche (1924-2012) calls the *'scene of primal seduction'*, a myth of human origins that takes the encounter with an enigmatic other as constitutive of human subjectivity. Laplanche (1999) offers a distinctive and critical re-working of Freudian metapsychology. In particular, he is concerned to re-imagine Freud's early theory of seduction in a way that not only demonstrates the primacy of the other and his or her unconscious in the formation of the subject's psyche, but also thereby establishes 'new foundations' for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis itself.

Born without an unconscious, the infant, says Laplanche, is helplessly subject to a continual stream of enigmatic 'messages' conveyed by the caregiver. These messages are not simply verbal, but rather include the full range of what Bollas (1987) calls the caregiver's 'logic of relating': looking, touching, seeing, hearing, smelling and speaking. The infant is caught up in this perpetual, bewildering, multi-layered communicative medium where the messages conveyed by the adult are saturated with unconscious sexual significance, carrying a surplus of representation that the infant is unable to metabolise. So whilst the infant cannot help but assimilate, absorb and try to understand these enigmatic, exciting messages, there remains an excess within the message that remains forever opaque, provoking the child into continuous, creative meaning-making efforts. It is this communicative residue, index of a radical and puzzling alterity lodged like a splinter within, that lives on as the repressed basis of the infant's own unconscious drives.

Laplanche goes on to tell us that the message conveyed by the adult – the look, the gesture, the tone of voice – is one that, in its passage from the adult's unconscious, has become uncoupled from its referent. In other words, the enigmatic message comes to mean something *to* the child without the child or the adult necessarily realising precisely *what* is being conveyed. It is as if the adult's unwitting address transmits a question to which there can be no answer, a demand that the child will thereafter ceaselessly attempt throughout life to translate, bind and come to terms with. It is this perpetual psychic activity that ensures there is no simple link between the past and the present; no linear or determinate relationship between the parental unconscious and the child's. Instead there is, says Laplanche (1999), a '*profound reshaping*'; an ongoing process where, in adulthood, we are pushed by that inner enigmatic inner trace of otherness to continue the work of translation, to rework and revise what we have already spent our lives unconsciously attempting to decipher.

Laplanche (1999) deploys the cosmic metaphor of the 'Copernican revolution' to refer to the discovery of the irreducibly alien other within and its links with the actual, adult other. In this model, the adult other's decentering effect is aligned with the Copernican relocation of the sun to the centre of the solar system. By contrast, Freud's psycho-sexual paradigm is metaphorically affiliated with Ptolemy's geocentric model in which the earth is firmly placed at the centre of the universe. Laplanche suggests the other's opaque, sexually-saturated communication exerts a gravitational 'pull' we are helpless, as infants, to resist. But in the face of our unwilling 'Copernican' openness to the enigmatic other around whom our internal world orbits, there is always an opposing 'Ptolemaic' tendency towards closure or repression; an attempt to re-centre ourselves, to bring the enigma under control. '[T]he dominant tendency' writes Laplanche (1999) '*is always to relativize the discovery and to re-assimilate and reintegrate the alien, so to speak*' (p. 66). In psychoanalysis, this 'Ptolemaic' tendency is evident in the patient's well-rehearsed self-constructions, the narratives that repress the enigma, binding the signifier to a familiar and reassuring self-identity. Rather than continually rehashing familiar interpretations and stories, the analyst attempts to re-open a 'Copernican' space within the transference through which the '*dimension of alterity*' (p. 230) can once again be encountered. By preserving rather than repressing what Laplanche (2014) calls '*the sharp goad of the enigma*' (p. 96), the '*old, insufficient, partial and erroneous*' (p. 164) translations of the originary childhood enigma may give way to fresh ideas and different understandings.

Laplanche of course is primarily interested in psychoanalytic work as the site of our psychic efforts to re-describe, symbolise or translate the enigmatic trace of the other within. But he does not regard psychoanalysis as the only or even the most important location of such work. '*If one accepts that the fundamental dimension of transference is the relation to the enigma of the other*' he writes, '*perhaps the principal site of transference... beyond or after analysis, would be the multiple relation to the cultural, to creation or, more precisely, to the cultural message*' (1999, p.222). Laplanche (1999) goes on to argue that a central characteristic of the cultural is an address to '*the nameless crowd*' who will receive the '*message in the bottle*' cast out by the artist to '*others scattered in the future*' (p. 224). The cultural, in this reading, thus constitutes an intrusive and sexually stimulating enigma that is received by the anonymous future addressee without the artist or writer explicitly addressing anyone in particular. Just as transference constitutes a re-opening of the originary situation of primal seduction, so too the book, the work of art, the film – indeed, Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony – provokes a response in the recipient or addressee who is ineluctably pulled into the orbit of its unconscious message: something which '*repeats the originary situation of the human being*' (p. 83).

But what is the fate of this cultural message? Returning once more to the '*nameless crowd*' at the Queen's Hall, perhaps we can now begin to discern in more detail how Forster's characters respond to its call. It is evident that most attempt to control the overwhelming impact of Beethoven's music by resorting to safe, familiar critiques and 'Ptolemaic' readings: they domesticate the enigma by drawing on accepted or standardised ways of responding. Tibby, for example, refuses to give himself over to the emotional experience of the music; he remains trenchantly intellectual, studying the score throughout the performance as if it were a crossword puzzle. Aunt Juley is there to have a good time: she does not '*go in for being musical*' (p. 38), but her surreptitious tapping reveals her to be one of those individuals elsewhere described by Forster (1951) who '*tend to slip about on the surfaces of masterpieces, exclaiming with joy but never penetrating*' (p. 105). Frau Mosebach, who despises English music, refuses on the grounds of nationalism rather than musical taste to stay on for Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, whilst the pitiful Leonard Bast can barely hear the music over his clamorous yearning to acquire the trappings of a culture from which he feels forever excluded: '*Oh, to pronounce foreign names correctly! Oh, to be well-informed, discoursing at ease on every subject*' (p. 39). Although Margaret's soul is cultivated enough to respond sensitively to the notes she hears, it is only Helen who is really able creatively to receive Beethoven. It is she who is brave enough to attempt a 'Copernican' openness to the full blast of the music's message, who is able to respond in a way that '*preserves the sharp goad of the enigma*'. Just as the implantation of the disturbing, sexually-saturated alterity of the other drives the infant's developing unconscious subjectivity, so too does Beethoven's traumatic goblin message drive Helen to undertake the inner psychic work that will eventually propel Forster's entire plot. Indeed, it is her rapt encounter with Beethoven that leads her inadvertently to mistake Leonard Bast's umbrella for her own, a piece of unconscious acting out that will set their future relationship in motion. But the Laplanchean re-shaping of Helen's inner world has already begun with a passing kiss from Paul Wilcox that made '*the reliable walls of youth collapse*'; it eventually culminates in her desperate one night stand with Leonard Bast, a sexual encounter that will result in Margaret ensuring that *Howards End* passes to the illegitimate offspring of their ill-fated liaison.

Forster and Laplanche may seem at first blush to be unlikely companions. But both can be seen to share a profound preoccupation with matters of inheritance. For Forster, the battle for heritage is not only fought out over the class struggles and the gender divides of Edwardian England; it is also fought out between the legal, testamentary heirs to a family home and those who prove themselves to be its rightful intellectual and spiritual successors. For Laplanche, issues of inheritance are played out in the various ways we are bequeathed the unconscious of the other; and how we become heirs to an otherness pulsating deep within that keeps us forever partially foreign to ourselves. Both writers are, in different ways, interested in alterity; or, more specifically, in sustaining a connection with otherness in the face of almost irresistible countervailing forces. For both, it is the '*sharp goad*' of art, literature and perhaps above all music that opens and re-opens the door to the other, that constitutes the uncanny goblin footfall of a radical alterity pushing us in the direction of connection, of relationship; towards a consciousness that might yet - one day - allow us to '*connect the prose and the passion*', to '*see life steadily and see it whole*'.

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